

## **How can city fund the road to repairs?**

June 19, 2009

Matthew Tully

The Indianapolis Star

Sports stadiums no doubt lure visitors to the city. But ultimately, more fundamental things are what keep people living in the city.

Things such as the condition of neighborhood streets, the quality of schools and the rate of crime. So while much of the local political world's attention these days is focused on plans to deal with stadium deficits, it's good to also see an emerging focus on the city's infrastructure.

After all, the mayor's Chief of Staff Paul Okeson correctly insists, the quality of streets, sidewalks, sewers and bridges is an economic development as well as a public safety issue, and something that helps determine the state of a neighborhood.

"We need quality streets. We need more sidewalks, and we historically haven't done a good job of keeping up with the ones we have," Okeson said. "We've got to get past this nickel-and-dime stuff."

Meaning: The city must find a way to make up for decades of insufficient spending on its infrastructure.

"To get ahead of it, you really have to come up with some sizable capital," Okeson said. "You have to get creative to find a way to raise \$50 million or \$100 million -- or whatever amount it is -- without further burdening the taxpayer."

A few weeks ago, I wrote about the first meeting of the city's new Infrastructure Advisory Commission. The group's charge is to look at the scope of the city's \$5 billion infrastructure backlog, study potential ideas to raise large pots of money and come up with a long-term plan.

Critics will say history is filled with ambitious-sounding commissions that leave behind little more than meeting minutes. That's true. But there's reason for optimism here, starting with the decision to simply identify this issue as a priority. Additionally, one of the city's most impressive department heads, Director of Enterprise Development Michael Huber, is leading the effort.

The ideas under consideration include privatizing city parking meters and parking lots, selling off assets and finding savings in ongoing sewer and septic projects. City officials wonder whether there is money to be made or saved at the airport or the water company.

"We want to be somewhat conservative," Okeson said, "but also push the envelope."

Personally, I'd like to see the mayor's office make the case for a massive bond issue aimed at funding hundreds of millions of dollars in street, sidewalk and alley repairs, in addition to securing whatever money can be raised through more creative, nontax methods. But Mayor Greg Ballard doesn't support the idea of raising taxes for infrastructure.

Politically, that's probably a wise move. It doesn't, however, mean a nontax plan will be a slam-dunk. Just ask Gov. Mitch Daniels, who received large-scale grief for his Toll Road lease plan a few years back.

Okeson and Huber believe Indianapolis residents will accept a plan that tackles the core issue of infrastructure. Fortunately, or unfortunately, they won't have to work hard to convince residents of a problem. Anyone who hit a pothole this spring or has a crumbling sidewalk in front of their home understands.

"We've heard it," Okeson said. "People are ready for us to make a significant investment in infrastructure, especially if we're not talking about a tax increase."

In the past, he said, these debates have centered on two ideas: increasing taxes or cutting spending. The administration is looking for a "third way." Time is short; the roads are getting older, and the mayor's term is reaching its halfway point.

"If we're not out with a fairly solid (plan), with a timeline, within three to six months, we're going to lose the window of opportunity to make some meaningful moves," Okeson said.

The opportunity shouldn't be missed. Because when it comes to local government, roads and sidewalks are about as meaningful as it gets.